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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MONTREAL 000743

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USDA FAS FOR FAS CMP/HTP
USDA FOR USDA APHIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [EIND](#) [ETRD](#) [PREL](#) [CA](#)

SUBJECT: Varroa Parasite Infests Quebec Honeybee Hives

1. SUMMARY: Quebec's honeybee population is under threat from a Varroa Mite parasite infestation that will likely reduce the province's modest honey production. Quebec beekeepers' ability to combat the mite has been limited by delayed discovery of the parasite's resistance to the widely used pesticide Fluvalinate, and restricted access to the Coumaphos pesticide used in the U.S. and other Canadian provinces. Though media reports suggested the Varroa infestation could have a negative impact on pollination of Quebec fruit orchards, local experts believe provincial harvests this year will remain stable. However, if the bee population continues to decline, Quebec fruit producers will have to develop other cultivation methods. END SUMMARY.

2. Quebec's honeybee population is being ravaged by a tiny, bloodsucking parasite called the Varroa Mite, which destroys the bees' reproductive cycle. The mite has been in Canada for approximately 15 years, and about 8 years in Quebec, kept under control primarily by use of the pesticide Fluvalinate. Last Fall, however, the Ministere de l'Agriculture, des Pecheries et de l'Alimentation du Quebec (MAPAQ), Quebec's Department of Agriculture, reported that the Varroa Mite had developed resistance to Fluvalinate, according to Dr. France Desjardins, a veterinarian and an expert in insect diseases with the MAPAQ.

3. The province's beekeepers estimate that as a result of the mite's recently increased resistance to Fluvalinate, they have lost 40 to 60 percent of their bee populations this year. MAPAQ also says that the cold April weather killed off many already debilitated colonies.

4. U.S. beekeepers have lived with the Varroa mite for over 20 years, controlling it through the use of the pesticide Coumaphos. Pesticide use is not yet fully harmonized between the U.S. and Canada, and use of Coumaphos is allowed only through a permit issued by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). Several other Canadian provinces began to use Coumaphos last year when they discovered resistance problems with Fluvalinate, and have had favorable results. MAPAQ applied for a permit on behalf of Quebec beekeepers after it discovered the mites' resistance to Fluvalinate, and CFIA approved the application in March 2003.

5. According to Peter Keating, a Quebec-based commercial beekeeper and former inspector for MAPAQ, one reason for Quebec being later to detect the Fluvalinate resistance may be that MAPAQ does not employ a full-time bee expert. Ontario, by comparison, employs a full-time expert and inspector and discovered the resistance problem in the summer of 2001, in time to devise new strategies against the mite.

6. According to Statistics Canada, Quebec ranks sixth among Canadian provinces in honey production (Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba are the leading producers), accounting for about \$3 million of the \$70 million of honey produced in Canada each year. A potentially more significant effect of a decline in Quebec's bee population would be on the province's agricultural industry, as many orchards rely heavily on the bees' pollination process for fruit cultivation. According to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, the estimated dollar value of honeybee pollination to Canadian agriculture was worth over \$C18 billion in 2000, \$C1 billion of that in Quebec. Quebec-based apiarists generated about 6 percent of their revenues from the rental of their hives for pollination last year.

7. Laurent Pellerin, president of the Union des producteurs agricoles du Quebec (Quebec Union of Agricultural producers), believes the Quebec government should provide some financial assistance to beekeepers whose hives have been infested. However, Keating says that since there is no compulsory registration for beehives in Quebec, neither the MAPAQ nor any other government agency has a way of verifying compensation claims.

8. The decline in Quebec's honeybee population cannot be solved by importing replacement honeybees from the U.S. The CFIA has prohibited live bee imports from the United States (with the exception of Hawaii) since 1987, believing that almost 100 percent of U.S. bee colonies are infested with Varroa mites. In an assessment report issued in March 2003, the CFIA deemed importation of U.S. queen honeybees too high-risk to permit, because Fluvalinate-resistant Varroa mites are widespread in the United States and Coumaphos resistance is emerging. The report determined that Coumaphos-resistant

Varroa mites would become widespread throughout most honey-producing areas much more rapidly if Canada allowed importation of U.S. honeybees.

9. Former MAPAQ inspector Keating suspects some individual Quebec beekeepers are illegally importing U.S. queen bees, and believes that allowing importation of these bees would "open a Pandora's box" of infestation that could devastate the Quebec bee population, if mites resistant to Coumaphos were to breed with those resistant to Fluvalinate. In the past ten years outbreaks of infestations have hit both Michigan and New York rather hard, but in both cases the industry was able to replenish itself, Keating claimed. "Quebec and Canadian beekeepers should learn from these experiences and develop defense strategies over the long-term. Importation would be a short-term solution with damaging long-term prospects," he said.

10. Jollin Charest, agronomist for the MAPAQ, told post he does not believe the lack of bees will greatly affect the pollination process for fruit orchards this year. Charest says apple orchards are struggling to find beehives, but says some are finding alternative methods, while others are not using them at all. Charest estimates that only 20 percent of apple tree flowers need to be pollinated by honey bees in order to have a good crop year; other local insects, wind, wild bees or bumblebees can serve as alternative pollinators. While it is still too early in the year to estimate whether lack of honeybees will have a big impact on the fruit harvest, Charest expects a relatively stable season with little loss. Gerald Chouinard, of the Institute for Agro-Environment Research and Development, concurs with Charest regarding this year's harvest but says if the bee population continues to decline, Quebec fruit producers will have to develop other cultivation methods.

KANTER